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Head & Neck Surgery

Pediatric & Adult Otolaryngology

Facial Reconstructive Surgery

EAR WAX

WHAT IS EAR WAX?

The ear canal is shaped somewhat like an hourglass. The skin on the outer part of the canal has special glands that produce earwax. The purpose of this natural wax is to repel water and to trap dust and sand particles. Usually a small amount of wax accumulates, and then dries up and falls out of the ear canal carrying with it unwanted particles. Ear wax is helpful in normal amounts and serves to coat the skin of the ear canal where it acts as a temporary water repellent. The absence of ear wax may result in dry, itchy ears, and even infection.

Most of the time the ear canals are self-cleaning, that is, there is a slow and orderly migration of ear canal skin from the eardrum to the outer opening. Old earwax is constantly being transported from the deeper areas of the ear canal to the opening where it usually dries, flakes, and falls out.

SHOULD YOU CLEAN YOUR EARS?

Under ideal circumstances, you should never have to clean your ear canals. However, we all know that this isn't always so. When wax has accumulated so much that it blocks the ear canal (and hearing), your physician may have to wash it out, vacuum it, or remove it with special instruments. Alternatively, your physician may prescribe ear drops that are designed to soften the wax (such as Cerumenex).

You may first wish to try an over-the-counter product such as Debrox or Murine Ear Drops. If your ear still feels blocked after using these drops, you should consult your physician. You must know that you do not have a hole (perforation or puncture) in your eardrum. Putting ear wax softeners in your ear in the presence of an eardrum perforation may cause an infection. Similarly, simply washing one ear in the presence of a perforation may start an infection. If you are uncertain whether or not you have a hole in your eardrum, consult your physician. Some patients will have a hypersensitivity to these products. If pain, tenderness or a local skin rash develops, you should discontinue the use of these drops.

IS IT OK TO USE Q-TIPS?

Never put anything smaller than your elbow in your ear! Wax is not formed in the deep part of the ear canal near the eardrum, but only in the outer part of the canal. So when a patient has wax pushed up against the eardrum, it is often because he has been probing his ear with such things as Q-Tips, bobby pins or twisted napkin corners. Such objects only serve as ramrods to push the wax in deeper. Also, the skin of the ear canal and the eardrum is very thin, fragile and easily injured. The ear canal is more prone to infection after it has been whipped clean of the "good" coating type wax. In addition, we have seen many perforated eardrums as a result of these efforts.

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